

network

HUMANITIES

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Exhibit honors Japanese American sports clubs and the remarkable woman behind them

They had names like the Mustangs, the Broncos, the Tigers and the Midgets, and for 24 years they ruled over a loose affiliation of Japanese American sports teams in Southern California and beyond, winning championships in football, baseball and basketball from the 1920s through the early '40s and producing a number of outstanding athletes.

Now the Little Tokyo Service Center, a social service and economic development agency in Los Angeles, with the help of a California Story Fund grant, has put together an exhibit to honor the accomplishments

of these teams, collectively known as the Oliver Clubs, and the remarkable woman who sponsored them: Nellie Grace Oliver, a kindergarten teacher born in Ohio.

"The Oliver Clubs: Sports and Community in Japanese American Los Angeles," includes excerpts from interviews with former Oliver Club members as well as documents and photographs that trace the Oliver Clubs' 90-year history in the Japanese American community in Southern California.

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Above: Nellie Grace Oliver, the sponsor of the Oliver Clubs, in the late 1920s shortly after her trip to Japan. Photo courtesy of Visual Communications and the Kamayatsu family.

Above left: Members of the Oliver Clubs at Los Angeles Coliseum in the late 1930s. Photo courtesy of Joe Suski.

Seventeen projects tapped for California Story Fund awards

PROJECTS WILL BRING TO LIGHT MANY LITTLE-KNOWN STORIES

LATINOS WHO HELP BUILD CALIFORNIA'S BRIDGES, A WELL-KNOWN FILIPINO ACTIVIST AND THE INDIVIDUALS INVOLVED IN THE DISABILITY RIGHTS MOVEMENT IN RURAL CALIFORNIA ARE JUST THREE OF THE TOPICS OF THE CALIFORNIA STORY FUND PROJECTS FUNDED BY THE COUNCIL THIS PAST APRIL. A TOTAL OF 17 PROJECTS WERE AWARDED \$10,000 EACH IN GRANT MONEY.

The projects are located throughout California and will gather stories from people of various ages, economic levels and ethnic backgrounds. Four of the projects focus on youth, including one project in Los Angeles that will involve kids at a juvenile detention facility in

writing workshops, and another in San Jose, Calif. that will enable at-risk kids to document their neighborhood through photography and interviews.

The projects will involve the use of various media, including video and audio recordings, and feature

a culminating exhibit, video or performance for the general public, with opportunities for audience discussion.

The California Story Fund is an ongoing program of California Stories, the Council's multiyear initiative designed to connect Californians and foster understanding by uncovering personal and community stories that tell the story of today's California. The guidelines and an online application for the July 2, 2007 round of funding are now available on the Council's website.

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Iron worker Fidel Aguilera is one of the individuals featured in the recently funded California Story Fund project "The Bridge Builders: The Latino Experience."

The California Council for the Humanities is a state-based affiliate of the National Endowment for the Humanities. Humanities Network is published three times a year and mailed to anyone who requests it from the San Francisco office.

A WAY TO REFLECT ON LIFE'S BIG QUESTIONS

By James Quay, Executive Director

I RECENTLY HAD A CONVERSATION WITH A VISITING PROFESSOR FROM RHODE ISLAND, HERE DOING RESEARCH ON CALIFORNIA'S CULTURE. SHE HAD LEARNED OF THE COUNCIL'S CALIFORNIA STORIES INITIATIVE AND WANTED TO ASK SOME LARGE QUESTIONS, QUESTIONS SUCH AS, "IS THERE ANYTHING THAT DEFINES CALIFORNIA CULTURE?" AND "WHAT DO CALIFORNIANS, IN ALL THEIR DIVERSITY, HAVE IN COMMON?"

Not many people ponder such questions, I suppose, and even fewer are foolish enough to hazard answers, but I'm one of them. I found myself talking about the cultural contours of a state that has been continually reshaped by immigration and reactions to immigration, about the dreams, the disappointments and the persistent hopes that are voiced and revoiced in California literature and history.

To keep from sounding like some starry-eyed booster, I invoked the catastrophes of California's history: the genocide of California Native Americans, the disregard for the landscape, and the many episodes of racial injustice. I voiced the conviction that California is no exception to the dilemmas of post-industrial life, as the state and its population move from a present that values growth and efficiency to a future that must value sustainability. I tried to remain true to the struggles and the setbacks that fill the newspapers as well as the triumphs that cheer us on.

But in the end I could only repeat to her what I have said here before and what my privileged experience with the Council's programs has reinforced over and over again: Californians are people with hope in their bones, who leave homes because they believe life will be better elsewhere, who invent things because they believe the next new thing will be better, and who have seen it happen often enough to make the rest of the world believe it, too. California hope isn't a guarantee, it's a challenge, but is no less real for that.



How can I believe otherwise? I have before me descriptions of four California Story Fund projects. In each, a group of young people — undocumented, incarcerated, in "transitional" neighborhoods — are being given tools to express the very difficult realities they are experiencing. The director of each project believes that self-expression and self-reflection can change lives. The participants of each group are about to be challenged to express a perspective and communicate it to others.

The challenges of life in California are considerable, and these young Californians are challenged more than most. Of course, self-expression and self-reflection alone cannot change lives, but most would agree that they are needed if change is to occur.

Every humanities project carries the same basic animating convictions: that the human need for meaning is as important as the need for food, clothing and shelter, that the humanities examine what it means to be human, that participating in and attending these projects make us pause in our harried lives and ask what those lives mean, what the lives of others mean, and how those lives might connect with our own.

Over the years I've probably seen dozens, maybe hundreds, of photos and videos taken at CCH projects. The ones that never fail to move me are those of people listening intently. The generosity and importance of the act of listening cannot be overestimated. When these young people tell their stories, in print and in photographs, someone will be listening. And that is the modest but fundamental transaction that animates every public humanities project I've ever known. Your story is yours, but it connects you to my story, and our stories to larger stories. Of such sharing, community is made — as is hope. What a privilege it is to be a part of that story.

James Quay

CCH Board Nominee Ballot

I nominate

as a member of the California Council for the Humanities Board of Directors.

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Please fill out and mail along with supporting materials to:
CCH, 312 Sutter St., Suite 601, San Francisco, CA 94108

BOARD NOMINATIONS SOUGHT

The California Council for the Humanities will select at least three new members for the Board of Directors later this year and invites nominations from the public.

Council board members come from both academic and public arenas and are committed to advancing the public use of the humanities to foster understanding between people and to encourage their engagement in community life. Members serve three-year terms, renewable once.

The Council seeks outstanding board members of all ethnic backgrounds and from all parts of the state. This year the Council particularly welcomes nominations of people living in Orange County, the North Coast, the San Joaquin Valley, San Diego and the Inland Empire.

To nominate an individual, please complete the short board nomination form and submit the following supporting materials:

- A brief resume from the nominee.
- A statement indicating the nominee's occupation, education, areas of public service and qualifications for membership.
- Assurance that the nominee is willing to serve.
- If you are nominating yourself, please include a letter of recommendation from someone other than yourself.

Make the strongest case you can for the nominee. Nominations must be received in the Council's San Francisco office no later than Friday, Oct. 12, 2007.

Please note: No nomination will be considered without the requisite supporting materials.

UPCOMING COUNCIL MEETINGS

The next quarterly meeting of the California Council for the Humanities will take place in San Francisco on Thursday, September 20. The last meeting of the year will be held on Thursday, December 13 in Los Angeles.

The meetings are open to public and begin at 9:30 a.m. For confirmation and additional details, please contact the San Francisco office at 415/391-1474 or send an e-mail to Patricia Croteau at pcroteau@calhum.org.

FROM THE BARRIOS TO

The Big Leagues



EXHIBIT DOCUMENTS LONG-NEGLECTED HISTORY OF MEXICAN AMERICAN BASEBALL IN LOS ANGELES

Background photo: The famed Carmelita Chorizeros, who won 20 baseball championships in Los Angeles from the 1940s through the 1960s. Photo courtesy of Saul Toledo.

Inset left: Elias Baca, in the early 1930s, who is believed to have been the first Mexican American baseball player at UCLA. Photo courtesy of Dr. Reynaldo Baca. Inset right: Al Padilla, a well-known East Los Angeles ballplayer was interviewed for the Mexican American baseball project. Photo courtesy of Al Padilla.

IF YOU WERE MEXICAN AMERICAN IN LOS ANGELES IN THE 1940S, '50S OR '60S, THERE WAS ONLY ONE PLACE TO BE ON A SUNDAY AFTERNOON: DOWN AT THE NEIGHBORHOOD DIAMOND FIELD WATCHING A BASEBALL GAME

Families congregated at fields all over Los Angeles to support their favorite teams, sitting on the sidelines or in makeshift stands drinking beer, eating tacos and tamales, and gossiping and laughing with friends as mariachis strolled nearby.

One of the legendary teams of the time was the Carmelita Chorizeros, called the New York Yankees of barrio baseball and sponsored by the owner of a chorizo factory. Many other teams flourished in the postwar years and produced outstanding professional and semi-pro baseball players. Yet, almost no attention has been given to this aspect of baseball history or the role that baseball played in Mexican American culture.

Now an exhibit of oral histories, photographs and memorabilia spanning from amateur teams to superstar big league pitcher Fernando Valenzuela, who helped the Dodgers win the World Series in 1981, takes a big step toward giving Mexican American baseball its due. "Mexican American Baseball in Los Angeles: From the Barrios to the Big Leagues," which has been on display at several venues over the past year and is scheduled to open at Pomona Public Library this October and at other libraries and institutions in 2008, was funded by the Council under the California Story Fund.

The exhibit was the brainchild of Terry Cannon, founder of the Baseball Reliquary, a small nonprofit organization dedicated to fostering an appreciation for American art and culture through the context of baseball.

Cannon first got the idea for the exhibit after reading an article

about barrio baseball in prewar Los Angeles around the time he formed his organization. But it wasn't until 2004 as a student in the library program at Pasadena City College that the idea began to take shape.

"I was at the library at California State University Los Angeles interviewing a circulation technician for a course I was taking [Cannon works as a library assistant at Alhambra High School in addition to directing the Reliquary], and I noticed the display cases in the library. The student body is heavily Latino, and I could imagine those cases filled with photographs and artifacts related to Mexican American baseball history. I mentioned my idea to the technician, who put me in touch with Cesar Caballero, acting university librarian, who loved the idea and connected me to Francisco Balderrama, professor of Chicano Studies and History.

"This was truly a collaborative effort between the university and our small grassroots organization," Cannon said.

"I originally thought we might be able to find work-study students to gather oral histories, but Balderrama was so impressed with the project idea that he designed an oral history class around it and offered it during the 2005 fall semester, and then again in fall 2006," Cannon said.

Balderrama's students collected photos and artifacts and interviewed players who Cannon was able to identify through his organization's contacts. "The course was so popular that people kept calling me to get in long after the enrollment period closed," Balderrama said.

The students interviewed former players, coaches, families of ballplayers and even concession stand workers at Dodger Stadium. They delved into the history of Chavez Ravine, where Dodger Stadium now

stands, which was home to generations of Mexican Americans before the City of Los Angeles evicted the residents and leveled the area.

Although the original focus was on teams in the Los Angeles area, Cannon also identified teams in other parts of California to document, including one in Corona made up of citrus workers.

"Teams were often sponsored by businesses or growers, who reasoned that if people could play baseball as a team they would transfer those skills to the workplace," Balderrama explained. "But Mexican American teams often used the teams for their own purposes."

Added Cannon, "The citrus workers started going to management to ask for better working conditions. When they traveled to other towns to play baseball, they would use that as an opportunity to find out about working conditions elsewhere. There was a definite link between baseball and the politics of the time."

"Mexican American Baseball in Los Angeles: From the Barrios to the Big Leagues" opened in March 2006 at the John F. Kennedy Memorial Library at Cal State Los Angeles. The exhibit, put together by Cannon and Cal State L.A. Librarian Caballero, with help from one of Balderrama's students from the oral history class, captured the imagination of the public, attracting hundreds of people during its ten-week run. A story about the exhibit made the front page of the Los Angeles Times, and ballplayers connected to the project appeared on radio and television programs to talk about their days playing ball and the communities that cheered for them.

"This is a vital part of baseball history, and it was exciting for people to see it acknowledged and celebrated," Canon said. "The exhibit also came at a time when people

were marching in the streets for immigrant rights, so it gave people something positive to celebrate."

By the time the exhibit ended in June, word had gotten out. Instead of packing up the materials and handing them over to Caballero for archiving at the university's library, which will eventually happen, Cannon arranged to have the exhibit presented at other institutions. Los Angeles Trade-Technical College contacted him almost immediately about featuring the exhibit on its campus, and the exhibit was on display there for two months at the end of 2006. Then in spring 2007, he got an inquiry from Eric Reyes, head of the Institute for Socio-Economic Justice, a grassroots storefront nonprofit serving migrant workers in the Imperial Valley town of Brawley, about bringing the exhibit there. The exhibit, which Cannon and his wife transported themselves in a rented van, was presented in Brawley this past spring and featured stories of Imperial Valley Mexican American ballplayers that Reyes had collected.

Meanwhile, this past November, 25 former members of the famed Carmelita Chorizeros served as grand marshals of the second annual Boyle Heights Multicultural parade. Los Angeles City Council member José Huizar, who represents East Los Angeles, has said he wants to have a special day at City Hall to honor Mexican American ballplayers. And Cannon has received out-of-state inquiries about the exhibit, including one from Texas. "Mexican Americans were playing baseball in many parts of the country, and I would love to see this project serve as a model for similar projects in other states," he said.

Now, said Cannon, the project needs more support than his small organization can provide if it is to keep on touring and evolving. "My hope is that the university will become more involved," he said, "so that the project can continue and grow."

When Cannon began the project, he had no idea how successful it would be. "The community and the media discovered an important aspect of Mexican American cultural history that they didn't even know existed," he said.

Added Balderrama, "The once-flourishing culture of amateur and semi-professional baseball was an important means for Mexican American to celebrate ethnic identity and instill community pride. But it was also a way for Mexican Americans to find a place for themselves in American society. It's an aspect of Mexican American history that has been ignored until now."



“PRISON TOWN, USA” IS A CALIFORNIA DOCUMENTARY PROJECT FILM ABOUT SUSANVILLE, CALIF., ONE OF HUNDREDS OF RURAL TOWNS ACROSS THE COUNTRY THAT HITCHED THEIR HOPES TO THE GREAT AMERICAN PRISON-BUILDING BOOM OF THE 1980S AND 1990S, TRYING TO SHORE UP STRUGGLING ECONOMIES. THE FILM FOLLOWS THE LIVES OF A CROSS-SECTION OF LOCALS WHOSE LIVES HAVE BEEN AFFECTED BY THE PRISONS. “PRISON TOWN” WILL BE SCREENED AT THE LOS ANGELES FILM FESTIVAL ON JUNE 23 AND 24 AND WILL AIR ON “POV,” PBS’ S SHOWCASE FOR INDEPENDENT FILMS, ON TUESDAY, JULY 24.

Recently, Humanities Network conducted an e-mail interview about the making of “Prison Town” with the directors of the film, Katie Galloway and Po Kutchins.

Galloway’s work has been awarded the Society of Professional Journalists’ best documentary prize and has received two Emmy nominations (for the program “Gun-Shots” and the “Frontline” documentary “The Case for Innocence”). She teaches at U.C. Berkeley.

Kutchins is an Emmy Award-winning producer and director. Her work includes a film profiling a juvenile on death row, a series on Doctors Without Borders, the acclaimed HBO film “Come Unto Me” and numerous A&E series, including “Family Plots.”

Humanities Network: HOW DID THE IDEA FOR “PRISON TOWN” COME ABOUT?

Katie Galloway: We had both worked on several criminal-justice-related stories, and were struck by a growing phenomenon that the media didn’t seem to be covering — rural towns being taken over by the prison industry. We began to think about how prison growth affects people who work in the system — and the communities where prisons had become the defining industry. What had they hoped for? What had happened to their towns? How had the landscape of these places been changed culturally, economically and psychologically?

HM: WHY DID YOU SELECT SUSANVILLE?

Po Kutchins: We researched dozens of communities across the country that had become prison towns, and Susanville offered a range of elements: a vivid past, a stunning setting — and a lot of prisons. It also still had a sense of identity, albeit threatened, unlike some towns that had been so incorpo-

rated into the prison system that there was little else left. And we were lucky that one of our field producers had family in the area, which helped us overcome the difficult hurdles of trust and access.

HN: WHAT WAS YOUR APPROACH TO MAKING THE FILM?

PK: We wanted to tell the story in verité style as much as possible, so the viewer could be in the moment with the characters and understand the topic from an insider’s perspective. We wanted the characters to tell their own stories, in their own voices, rather than present a “voice of God” narrator. We didn’t want to insert our own opinions overtly. It was important to us to let the audience come to their own conclusions.

HN: HOW DID YOU FIND THE INDIVIDUALS YOU FEATURE IN THE FILM?

PK: The process of finding the characters for the story was quite difficult. People in Susanville, like those in many prison towns, tend to be distrustful of outsiders. We were from New York and the Bay Area, and locals were very hesitant to talk about anything related to the prison, particularly on the record — those who work in corrections are actually told not to talk to members of the press at all, and everyone else in the town is connected to the prisons in some way. Suspicion and reticence were everywhere. We found our characters one at a time, sometimes months apart, by developing local contacts and getting those people to trust us. But it was not easy.

HN: WERE THERE OTHER CHALLENGES IN MAKING THE FILM?

KG: Another big challenge was getting access to the prisons. They tend to be run like fiefdoms — and it’s up to individual wardens to decide whether to give you access or not. Especially at High Desert

State Prison — a facility with a lot of violence that’s been subjected to much scrutiny over the years — they were extremely reluctant to let us in. Ultimately, the California Film Commission, a state agency, lobbied on our behalf. That and some administrative changes at the prison enabled us to get in.

HN: WHAT WAS THE MOST SATISFYING ASPECT OF MAKING THE FILM?

KG: On a micro level it was seeing Lonnie and Jennifer’s success. On a macro level it was bringing these little-known but very important issues to a broad national audience. The prison expansion issue tends to be very narrowly drawn in the public mind. We have all these criminals, so we have to have a place to put them, right?

There is not enough public discussion of the fallout from our incarceration policy. What is it doing to the millions of children whose parents are in prison? To the more than 1 million nonviolent people incarcerated who live in these horrible environments and are then returned to our communities? What is it doing to the three-quarters of a million people who spend most of their waking hours working in these institutions? To their families? To their communities? What is it doing to us as a country financially, culturally and spiritually?

HN: IS THERE ANYTHING YOU WOULD HAVE LIKED TO INCLUDE BUT COULDN’T?

PK: It was impossible to cover as many aspects of prison expansion and incarceration as we would have liked. We didn’t even touch on the ways the remote locations make it nearly impossible for incarcerated individuals to stay connected to their loved ones and communities. We weren’t able to spend another four to five years to observe the impact of prison work on the guards, but I think the townspeople’s testimonials hint at what some of the fallout may be.

HN: HOW DID THE FINANCING COME TOGETHER?

KG: Prison Town took four years to make. Once we settled on Susanville, we took a four-day trip from New York City to scout the town and shoot a development reel. We interviewed various people, filmed the gorgeous landscape, and put

together a reel that brought in a little grant money from the Pacific Pioneer and Eastman foundations.

We were shooting a little at a time until our first substantial grant came in — from the Council and the Skirball Foundation [CCH’s partner in funding for the California Documentary Project]. We were then able to spend much more time in Susanville, and that’s when we found most of our main characters. We followed their stories for about two years.

After we put together a new reel, KQED [San Francisco’s PBS station] stepped up to co-produce the film, and shortly after that, we obtained funds from Independent Television Service, which allowed us to finish the film. We also got a lot of help along the way from many talented and generous friends and colleagues.

HN: WHAT DO YOU HOPE THE AUDIENCE WILL TAKE AWAY FROM THE FILM?

KG: As several other recent documentaries — from “An Inconvenient Truth” to “The Smartest Men in the Room” — have suggested, we are at a point in history where we need to significantly change our ways of thinking and living, or the consequences may be irreparable. We believe that examining the implications of prison expansion is a very important part of the debate over how to move forward as a society.

HN: WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU IMPART TO EMERGING FILMMAKERS?

PK: Ask a lot of questions of people who have been through the process before. From the subject matter to the level of production necessary for success to issues of fundraising, making an independent film is a very complicated process, and there are lots of pitfalls along the way. So try to get good advice. Many filmmakers are very generous this way. It’s also a good idea to work on other productions so you can see how it works — and how it doesn’t.

Above from left to right: Filmmakers Katie Galloway (top) and Po Kutchins; a corrections officer featured in “Prison Town”; an inmate is reunited with his wife and child on release from a Susanville prison and later works out to stay in shape while hoping for a job to materialize. Photos courtesy of Katie Galloway and Po Kutchins.

Remembering the Olivers

(Continued from page 1)

"They told me to come to the banquet to receive my award and said I would meet a lot of Japanese Americans who were great athletes in the past," Nakase said. "When I went, it was huge. There were a couple hundred people, and you could tell by the way people carried themselves, walking around and greeting everyone that they were athletes. I never even knew that they did so many great things in sports. I think it's great they can carry on the Oliver Award for such a long time. It brings a sense of community to Japanese Americans."

"Sports have long played an important role in the Japanese American community, and this project, as well as the many Japanese American sports leagues in Southern California, reflect that," said Fong.

Fong hopes that the new recreation center that the Little Tokyo Service Center is now raising funds to build will continue that tradition. "The Little Tokyo area is still the cultural and religious heart of the Los Angeles Japanese American community, but most Japanese Americans live outside the area and visit only once or twice a year. We hope that the new recreation center will be a way to bring families back more often."

The Oliver Clubs exhibit is another reason to come back. It's on display at the Far East Building and at six interactive kiosks located in the neighborhood. Those from outside Los Angeles can view the exhibit at the Discover Nikkei website at www.discovernikkei.org/nikkeialbum/node/2237.

Little Tokyo Service Center, oversaw the project with help from Hillary Jenks, a doctoral student at USC whose dissertation focuses on the 20th-century history of Little Tokyo.

"We wanted to keep the memory of the Olivers alive for the next generation," Fong said, "not only because it's important history but because there are lessons here about the importance of sports to kids and how one person can make a difference in kids' lives."

Oliver worked from 1917 until the beginning of the war to provide Japanese youths in the Little Tokyo area with an athletic and social outlet. During that time, she sponsored eight boys clubs and two girls clubs and traveled to Japan to learn more about Japanese history and culture.

Oliver helped her charges develop social skills as well as athletic ones. "Oliver Club members would meet every Friday, night and Oliver would have them conduct the meeting using Robert's Rules of Order," Jenks said. "She brought in a singing teacher, taught them how to dance, and introduced them to group activities like round-robin storytelling."

"After the meeting two fellows from the club were appointed to walk Miss Oliver to the streetcar, and they'd wait to see that she got on the car," recalled former Oliver Club member Joe Suski, who was on an Oliver team called the Juniors and went on to play baseball at UCLA.

Oliver Club members had great respect for Oliver. "To some she may have been too strict, and you know, she didn't hesitate to tell anyone to correct their language or their posture," Suski said. "She continually did that, but she was

good for us. She was always looking out for our welfare."

Everything changed at the outset of the war, when Japanese residents of Little Tokyo were sent to internment camps by order of the U.S. government. Many of the Olivers ended up in Manzanar in California or Heart Mountain in Wyoming.

Oliver didn't forget her old friends. She wrote to authorities on behalf of the Olivers and traveled to Manzanar to visit them. "She taught us more about democracy than our textbooks," said former Oliver Jack Kunitomi.

After the war, most of the Olivers settled away from the Little Tokyo area, and when Oliver died in 1947, she remained largely forgotten. But in 1960 a reporter at a local Japanese newspaper wrote an article about Oliver saying that the Oliver Club members were remiss in not remembering her long service to them.

That article motivated former Oliver members to revive the Oliver Clubs. Beginning in 1961, the Olivers began awarding an annual trophy (and later a college scholarship) to the best Japanese American high school athlete in the greater Los Angeles area. That tradition continued until 2001 when members, then in their 80s and 90s and with their numbers dwindling, decided it was time to call it quits.

Natalie Nakase won the Oliver Award in 1998 for basketball and went on to play for UCLA and the Women's National Basketball Association. "The experience of winning the award opened her eyes to the whole tradition of sports in the Japanese American community," said Jenks, who interviewed Nakase for the project.



Oliver Midgets in the practice yard of the Stimson Institute in Little Tokyo in the late 1920s. Photo courtesy of Joe Suski.

Department of Justice, on behalf of Empei Fujita, father of George and Henry Fujita, both of whom played on Oliver teams. The elder Fujita was in a federal camp in Santa Fe, New Mexico, where the government sent alien Japanese males considered "suspicious" for some reason. Frank Fukuzawa, an honorary Oliver who grew up in Little Tokyo, uncovered the letter in the course of doing research on Oliver's life.

My Dear Mr. Ennis:

I, Nellie G. Oliver, a retired teacher, taught for more than thirty years in the Hewitt Street Public School located in "Little Tokyo," Los Angeles, California.

Through school and social activities, I became intimately acquainted with many Japanese fathers and mothers and their children. These fathers and mothers worked hard and made many sacrifices that their children might obtain the best that America has to give. They were most co-operative and ever ready to aid the teachers, and deeply appreciated any interest taken in the welfare of their children.

I trust that you will pardon this lengthy introduction. This communication is on behalf of Mr. Empei Fujita and his family. Mr. Fujita is interned at the Santa Fe Federal Internment Camp. His wife, two daughters and two sons are at Heart Mountain. The sons are awaiting induction into the Army.

I have every reason to believe that Mr. Fujita and his devoted family are loyal and worthy of a hearing that I understand is to be given Mr. Fujita this month at the internment camp. I trust that the hearing may be favorable and may lead to his release and that he may soon return to his devoted family, who have long waited for his homecoming. His homecoming would ease worried aching hearts.

Respectfully,

*Nellie G. Oliver,
2720 West 9th Street,
Los Angeles, California*

Above top left: "The Oliver Clubs" exhibit in Little Tokyo drew a big crowd on opening day. Above bottom left: Former Oliver Club members outside the Discovery Center in Little Tokyo, where the Oliver Clubs exhibit is on display. Photos/Hillary Jenks.

Photo documentary tells story

The Thaos, new Hmong arrivals in Fresno, outside their first American apartment.

Below: Hmong photo studio backdrop at Fresno's Hmong New Year festival depicting the evacuation from Long Cheng in Northern Laos in 1975.

Photographer Joel Pickford aims to capture the essence of Hmong life and culture

PHOTOGRAPHER JOEL PICKFORD DOESN'T JUST TAKE PHOTOGRAPHS. HE CONSIDERS IT HIS JOB TO SOAK UP EVERYTHING HE CAN ABOUT THE HISTORY AND CULTURE OF HIS SUBJECTS AND TO USE THAT KNOWLEDGE TO GUIDE HIS PICTURE-TAKING.

Such was the case with his recent project on the Creole culture of Southern Louisiana and with his current work, a photographic documentary on Hmong refugees in Central California, funded by the Council under the California Documentary Project.

For the past two and a half years Pickford has read everything he can get his hands on about the Hmong, learned some Hmong language, and even traveled to the mountains of Laos, where most of the Hmong in Central California were born, to photograph Hmong village life. Along the way, he has taken some 10,000 photographs documenting Hmong weddings, funerals, clan meetings, healing ceremonies and almost every aspect of Hmong daily life.

An ethnic minority group who migrated from Southern China to the mountains of Laos 200 years ago, the Hmong were recruited by the CIA during the Vietnam War to fight a "secret war" in Laos against the Communists. When the Communists overthrew the U.S.-supported Lao government in 1975, a large part of the Hmong population fled their villages fearing reprisals. Some hid in the jungle, and many made their way to Thailand, finally ending up in refugee camps near Bangkok.

Fresno home to 30,000 Hmong

Fresno, in the heart of California's Central Valley, has become home to successive waves of the Hmong, some of whom had lived in refugee camps for decades. The last big wave of immigration occurred in the fall of 2005, but Hmong people began arriving in Fresno in the late 1970s and have since started businesses, raised their families and become leaders in the community. Today Fresno has one of the largest Hmong populations in the United States, with more than 30,000 Hmong. Two Hmong radio stations broadcast from Fresno, a statue outside the downtown courthouse depicts Hmong fighters, and this past November, 37-year-old Blong Xiong, who was born in a refugee camp in Thailand, became the first Hmong elected to the Fresno City Council.

Pickford first became interested in photographing the Hmong in 2003, when he had a chance to tour southeast Fresno, where many Hmong live. "I saw an incredibly colorful world — Section 8 apartment complexes transformed by gardens, beautiful textiles, murals, caged birds. The Hmong had added so much vibrancy to a run-down neighborhood."

Pickford's guide that day was a social worker from Fresno Interdenominational Refugee Ministries (FIRM), a faith-based organization that provides many services to Fresno's refugees. "They're very involved in the refugee community and are open to people engaged in a wide variety of refugee projects," Pickford said. "I thought it would be a good organization to work with."

With FIRM's help, Pickford sought funding but became discouraged by the lack of funders for photography projects and temporarily abandoned his efforts. Then a friend e-mailed him information about the Council's California Documentary Project grant line. "It seemed like a perfect fit, but

there was one problem. The submission deadline was four days away." Working furiously and in a flurry of e-mail with people at FIRM, the project sponsor, he made the Fed-Ex delivery deadline with just minutes to spare.

Pickford received word of his award right before Hmong New Year, a weeklong celebration between Christmas and New Year's that traditionally marks the end of the rice harvest in Laos. Pickford made that event his first foray into the Hmong world.

Capturing Hmong New Year

The Fresno celebration, the largest in the Hmong diaspora, features music, singing, games, dancing, special food and colorful costumes decorated with silver coins. "People in traditional New Year's costumes make a soft jingling noise as they walk around," Pickford noted. "It's a beautiful sound."

Pickford spent five days at the festival and shot hundreds of photographs. His aim was not only to capture the traditional aspects of Hmong culture but also to record the changes the culture is undergoing as the people adapt to American life. "I saw examples of that transition everywhere," Pickford said, "from the loud speakers blaring music to the Hmong teenagers dressed in contemporary clothing."

Rituals and ceremonies are important in Hmong culture, and Pickford has photographed many of them, including a healing ceremony called *hu plig*.

"Hmong believe that if something goes wrong in life it's because the soul has wandered from the body or been kidnapped by evil spirits," Pickford said. "In a *hu plig*, or soul-calling ceremony, a shaman tries to call back the soul of that person by literally calling out the back door of the house or apartment.

"During the ceremony, the shaman goes into a deep trance, jumping up and down on a bench [which represents a horse taking him to the spirit world] and chanting to dismiss the evil spirits as other people in the room mark out the rhythm of the chant with a gong or hand bells. At the end, when the shaman emerges, he gives the person a new name to trick the spirits into thinking he is someone else, so they won't steal his soul again."

Pickford credits Henry Delcore, professor of anthropology at Cal State Fresno and the project's humanities expert, for educating him about the Hmong and directing him to books and articles, and several other people for helping him gain entry into the Hmong world. Included among those were Tout Tou Bounthapanya, a transportation coordinator at FIRM who connected him to new Hmong residents, and Kristie Lee, a FIRM social worker who often served as Pickford's translator on shoots such as the ones at the Fresno Airport, where he went to photograph newly arriving Hmong in fall 2005.

Lee also introduced Pickford to her family. Her parents, Ger Lee and Wa Lor Lee, who came to Fresno as refugees 27 years ago, follow Hmong traditions, but, like many Hmong, stress the importance of education for their children. The children are bilingual in English and Hmong, and the oldest, Song Lee, is an assistant professor in counseling at Cal State Fresno and the only Hmong-speaking counseling educator with a doctorate in the United States.

of Fresno's Hmong

"Everyone in the family has thanked me for doing the project," Pickford said. "They value what I'm doing, and it's because of them along with several other people that I've had a chance to photograph cultural and social events that most outsiders never get to see. Ger Lee, a practicing Hmong shaman, even conducted a special ceremony for me, to give me a Hmong name."

Through his work on the project, Pickford has made many other friends in the Hmong community, including Chong and Doua Yang, who lost three of their children in a fire in Clovis, Calif., a year ago. "Once you are accepted, you quickly find that the Hmong are the some of warmest, most generous and loyal people you will ever know," he said.

A trip to Hmong villages in Laos

At the end of last year, Pickford spent two months in Laos, traveling to mountain villages to gain insight into the source of Hmong American culture. He arrived in time to photograph Hmong New Year. "I was carrying a large digital camera with five lenses, and people in remote villages who had never seen a foreigner before crowded around me. But once I explained what I was doing, the people were very welcoming, the same way they are in Fresno."

Back home in Fresno, Pickford continues taking photographs. "When I hear of anything happening in the Hmong community, I drop whatever I'm doing and go," he said.

One of Pickford's hopes for the project is that it will help Californians better understand who the Hmong are, why they are here and what they have to contribute. "Many Americans don't know about the the U.S.'s secret war in Laos or that when the Americans pulled out, the Pathet Lao government sprayed chemical weapons on Hmong villages and vowed to exterminate the people.

"I have learned so much about the Hmong, and I hope that the photographs capture some of the essential truths about the culture."

Hmong photos to be exhibited in Fresno next summer

An exhibit of Joel Pickford's Hmong photographs will be presented at the Fresno Metropolitan Museum in summer 2008. He plans to involve many local Hmong in exhibit events and hopes the whole community will turn out to see the photographs. "My goal is to bring the Hmong together with Californians from other ethnic backgrounds," Pickford said. An estimated 6,000 images will be archived by the Fresno City and Country Historical Society and other institutions. Pickford is currently seeking partner institutions interested in making the digital archive easy to navigate and accessible to the public on the Internet. "It would be a great resource for anthropologists, sociologists, historians and others interested in the Hmong," he said.

For more information on the project and to view additional photographs, visit Pickford Pictures at www.joelpickford.com.



Young woman in traditional green Hmong New Year's costume.



Hmong shaman.

All Hmong project photos by Joel Pickford.

California Story Fund awards

(continued from page 1)

The following is a complete list of the 17 projects. For more details, visit http://www.calhum.org/programs/story_intro.htm.

NORTHERN CALIFORNIA

Bill Sorro: His Life and Activism, sponsored by the Manilatown Heritage Foundation, San Francisco: Documenting the history of a Filipino leader in the San Francisco Bay area.



Bill Sorro and his wife, Huli, at home. Photo courtesy of Bob Hsiang Photography

The Bridge Builders: The Latino Experience, sponsored by the Fund for Labor Culture and History, San Francisco: An oral history and photography project about Latinos who helped build California's bridges.

Castroville Japanese School Oral History Project, sponsored by the Castroville Coalition: The stories of Castroville's former Japanese residents.

Documenting Disability History, sponsored by the Freed Center for Independent Living, Grass Valley:

The story of the disability rights movement in rural California.

FotoFolio, sponsored by Movimiento de Arte y Cultura Latino Americana, San Jose: Kids photograph their transitional neighborhood and interview residents.

Geographies of the Imagination, sponsored by the California College of the Arts, Oakland: Mapping the geographical landscapes of Chilean immigrants.

Life Under the Radar: Undocumented Youth, sponsored by La Raza Centro de Legal, San Francisco: A filmmaker documents the realities of life for undocumented kids living in the San Francisco Bay Area.

Los Hilos de la Vida: The Threads of Life, sponsored by Anderson Valley Unified School District, Boonville: Mexican American women make quilts based on their stories.

Out Ranks: GLBT Military Service from World War II to the Iraq War, sponsored by The Gay, Lesbian,



Steve Hall spent his 20-year naval career fearing he would be found out as gay. His story is part of "Out Ranks," a California Story Fund exhibit now taking place at the Gay Lesbian Bisexual Transgender Historical Society in San Francisco. Photo courtesy of Steve Hall.

Bisexual and Transgender Historical Society of San Francisco: The true story of gays in the military.

Remembering Our Manongs, sponsored by The Filipino American National Historical Society of Sonoma County, Santa Rosa: A documentary on early Filipino immigrants to California.

CENTRAL CALIFORNIA

Dr. Shirley Kennedy: The Life of an Activist, sponsored by the Center for Black Studies Research, UC Santa Barbara: A film about a Santa Barbara African American activist.



A night on the town on Central Avenue in the 1940s, from "The Eastsiders," a project aimed at preserving the history of L.A.'s Central Avenue corridor. Photo courtesy of Eighth and Wall.

Erasing the Past. Building the Future, sponsored by the Economic Opportunity Commission Liberty Tattoo Removal Program, documenting the stories of individuals who have their tattoos removed as a way to move on with their lives.

SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA

Borrowed Voices: Sharing the Stories of Incarcerated Youth, sponsored by Pitzer College Center for California Cultural and Social Issues, Claremont: Incarcerated youth tell their stories.

Building a Home in Antelope Valley: What is home? Where is Home? sponsored by Contemporary Modern Art Projects, Los Angeles: Exploring the idea of home in Antelope Valley.

The Eastsiders, sponsored by Eighth and Wall, Inc., Rolling Hills Estates: Preserving memories of a once-thriving African American neighborhood.

New Words, New Visions, sponsored by California Living History, Pasadena/Altadena: At-risk students use photography, writing to express their views.

Why We Gather: Building Community, sponsored by the Association for the Advancement of Filipino American Arts and Culture, Los Angeles: Capturing the traditions of Filipino Americans in Southern California.

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The mission of the California Council for the Humanities is to foster understanding between people and encourage their engagement in community life through the public use of the humanities.

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